

Sermons at Saint Paul's

A Wellspring of spiritual nourishment; A River of service in Jesus' Name

The Seventh Sunday of Easter/May 16, 2010
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Jesus' prayer is that all who believe in him may be one. The whole of chapter seventeen in John's gospel is this prayer. We read it on Maundy Thursday during the agapé meal before our worship that commemorates the Last Supper. Indeed, Jesus offers this prayer at the Last Supper before he is betrayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. From that night on over the centuries we have found it terribly difficult to be one with God and each other. Jesus' prayer for unity is in such marked contrast to our human nature that it comes at us with the rumble of an earthquake that shakes the very ground on which we stand. Who knows what Judas' motives were in turning against Jesus – money, disillusionment, the gains that violence or coercion can bring? Jesus' fervent desire for us is *none* of these things. It is their opposite – our connection with one another. Paul in his letter to the Romans remembers and carries on the same theme: "we, who are many, are one body in Christ" (12: 5).

Jesus desires our connection to one another in his prayer for unity. There is no connection without compassion. And the first task of compassion is to listen. Money can be a deafening noise so that we do not hear. In disillusionment we stop even trying to listen. And there is no listening in coercion. Judas ceased to listen. He cannot hear Jesus' prayer. No connection can be made, no compassion felt, without mutual listening. I asked someone once what it felt like to be really listened to. She said it was intoxicating. This is what the disciples felt on Pentecost which we will celebrate next week. The intoxication was not new wine, but the Holy Spirit. Poured upon them it made them one. In everyone's own language people could listen to God's deeds of power. It united them. There was listening and it was intoxicating.

As we gather today for our annual parish meeting, it occurs to me that one role of the church is to be a kind of scientific laboratory where we experiment with God's reign of mending and connection. We try out listening with our entire self. It's hard. We mix together as different people with different life experiences, backgrounds,

orientations and ethnicities. Will the outcome be one of those science lab explosions, or will it be deeper connection, broader compassion, fuller union. The latter is Jesus' prayer. Were it only up to us the experiment would fail. One of our discoveries has to be the necessity of divine action. We do not have it in ourselves to be united without God's compassionate Spirit. Jesus stretched out his arms on the cross so that all could be gathered within his loving embrace. Our unity is to be seamless like Jesus' robe for which the soldiers cast lots at the foot of the cross. Jesus' desire is that the eternal connection he experienced with his Father in heaven overflow to envelope all for whom he prayed. The purpose of the community that results is that the world may believe.

It is far too easy to find examples of division in the world. Just this past week in Philadelphia, a police sergeant admitted to shooting himself in the shoulder and then perpetuating the racist stereotype that the shooter was a young Black male. Apparently, the sergeant wanted to be famous, recognized, appreciated, listened to. That's not unique. All of us have felt the craving for appreciation, the need for recognition, to be someone in somebody's eyes. It is how we respond to these needs that makes the difference. Perhaps the sergeant was deafened by disillusion and the gains that violence can bring. Jesus' prayer, in contrast, is that we not discriminate but become one. We are listened to by God. God understands and appreciates. God's household is united in this love that listens.

There is an urgency to choosing love that listens. We can hear that urgency in the story of Paul and Silas and the jailer. Never mind that they have been jailed unjustly. Their orientation is to God with prayers and hymns. I like to imagine Jesus' prayer rumbling through like an earthquake. It unstops ears. It unbinds us from our cravings. Doors clang open and chains spring loose. The Roman jailer is no less captive to the consequences for a prisoner's escape. Believing that Paul and Silas' cell is empty he is about to take his life. "Do not harm yourself," Paul cries out, "for we are all here." To delay would be a matter of life or death. This too is the urgent cry of the church to a world that is bent on violence. "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here, joined together in a love that seeks to encompass the world. We are all here.

So if one role of the church is to explore connection, as members of Christ's body what is it that we must urgently be about? Or as the jailer asked, "what must I do to be saved?" The answer is, believe. Believe that you are listened to and loved. Recognize the trap of disillusionment and coercion for what it is, a dead end. Listen

to the cry, "Do not harm yourself, we are all here." The community of the Spirit is present. All are here to listen and include. The consequence is the jailer and his household are baptized without delay. They want to be part of that community of compassion and mutual listening. And so the circle widens. The second thing that we need to do is "thirst." These are very nearly the last words of the Bible. If we do not have a thirst for the Spirit's fullness then perhaps we should pray for such a thirst. Jesus' prayer is that we may thirst for oneness. The Spirit and the heavenly Jerusalem (the community to which we are all called), say "Come." Let everyone who is thirsty, come. To those who thirst for appreciation and esteem, come. To those who thirst for recognition and validity, come. To those who thirst for connection and communion, come. Take the water of life as a gift – and it's yours for free.

Amen.